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Gorgeous gloom and doom

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Body

FILM REVIEW

Anthropocene: The Human Epoch

Who knew the end of the world could be so beautiful? The latest eco-doc from Jennifer Baichwal (Manufactured Landscapes, Watermark), co-directed by Edward Burtynsky and Nicholas de Pencier, shows some of the changes we are making to the planet. Like the sunrise of a hydrogen bomb, they are stunning and scary.

Take "Bagger 293," an earth-moving machine working an open-pit coal mine in Germany. Ninety-six metres tall and using 16 megawatts of power, it could scoop up the material needed to build the great pyramid in less than a month. It looks like something out of science-fiction; in fact, you can see one in the background of a shot in TV's Westworld. The mine is expanding, displacing local residents; but it remains a weirdly beautiful sight.

Not all the film's segments are doom-and-gloom. Narrated by Alicia Vikander, Anthropocene: The Human Epoch visits an electric-car battery plant in Michigan, and delivers a time-lapse trip through the 57-kilometre Gotthard Base Tunnel in Switzerland, which will reduce the dangers and pollution of trucking freight along mountain roads. The film opens and closes in Kenya's Nairobi National Park, where mounds of elephant tusks are set ablaze to stop them being sold on the black market.

The directors illustrate some of the ironies of our age. Take the seawall in Gudong, China, constructed out of what look to be giant concrete jacks (the kids' toy). Its purpose is to protect a nearby oilfield from rising sea levels. You connect the dots.

The film also introduces some terminology. Anthroturbation is the process by which the crust of the planet is significantly altered by human activity. Technofossils are artifacts, everything from plastic to concrete, that will persist on a geologic time scale. And the technosphere is the sum of our manufactured output, estimated at 30 trillion tonnes.

The movie takes its title from the Anthropocene epoch, a proposal that we rename this period (currently known as the Holocene) as the Anthropocene, to mark the dubious honour of when Homo sapiens began to significantly affect Earth's geology and ecosystem.

Some proponents peg the Anthropocene at the beginning of the agricultural revolution following the last Ice Age. Others say 1945, when human-made radioactive debris first shows up in the geological record (and will persist for millennia). The filmmakers' stunning images, captured around the world, make it clear that whenever it started, it is ongoing.

Gorgeous gloom and doom

4 stars

National Post Anthropocene: The Human Epoch opens Sept. 28 in Toronto, Oct. 5 in Vancouver and Oct. 19 in Montreal, with other cities to follow. A complementary exhibit opens Oct. 28 at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, and the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. The directors will participate in a Q&A after the 7 p.m. Sept. 28 and 3 p.m. Sept. 30 screening at the Lightbox. !@COPYRIGHT=© 2018 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

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